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ABSTRACT

The effects of a parent intervention program on the development of parental awareness and perceptions of parental behavior were examined. Twenty-two parents and their respective children were randomly placed into either an experimental or a control group. The 11 parents in the experimental group were presented with child development information and parent/child conflict dilemmas to solve. Prior to and directly after the intervention, the parents of both groups were administered the Parental Awareness Measure and a modified version of the Children's Report of Parental Behavior Inventory. Analysis of covariance revealed that the parents in the experimental group made significant gains in parental awareness and also improved in their perceptions of parental behavior. When assessed 4 months later, parents in the intervention group made further significant gains in parental awareness but did not improve in perceptions of parental bshavior. Children in both groups did not significantly differ from each other upon immediate completion of the intervention, nor did children in the experimental group improve in their perceptions of parental behavior 4 months after treatment. It was suggested that cognitive development in parenthood can be facilitated through intervention. (Author/RH)

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# PARENT INTERVENTION AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF PARENTAL AWARENESS

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## ABSTRACT

*The effects of a parent intervention program on the development of parental awareness and improved perceptions of parental behavior were examined. Twenty-two parents and their respective children were randomly placed into an experimental and control group. The parents in the experimental group were presented with child development information and parent-child conflict dilemmas to solve. Prior to and directly after the intervention, the parents of both groups were administered the Parental Awareness Measure (PAM) and a modified version of the Children's Reports of Parental Behavior Inventory (CRPBI). Four months later the treatment group only was assessed. Analysis of covariance revealed that the parents in the experimental group made significant gains in parental awareness as well as improved perceptions of parental behavior. Four months later, the parents in the intervention group made further significant gains in parental awareness but not in improved perceptions of parental behavior. The children of both groups did not significantly differ from each other upon immediate completion of the intervention nor did the experimental group children improve in their perceptions of parental behavior following a four month hiatus. It is suggested that cognitive development in parenthood can be facilitated through intervention.*

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*The tasks of parenting are complex and diverse. Often parenting has been described as one of the most difficult roles with the least amount of preparation. Perhaps it is for this reason that much concern is given to parent group intervention. The types of intervention which are available to parents range from free-flowing open-ended discussion groups (Auerbach 1968, Hereford 1963) to highly structured and systematic training programs aimed at specific targeted behaviors (Carkhuff, 1971). Between these two polarities are several popular standardized programs. These include Parent Effectiveness Training (PET) (Gordon, 1970), the Adlerian Parent Study Group (APS) (Berrett, 1975), Systematic Training for Effective Parenting (STEP) (Dinkmeyer & McKay, 1976), Parent Involvement Program (PIP) (McGuiness & Glasser, 1978), and many others. These interventions are directed toward teaching parents specific techniques from a particular theoretical orientation which explicitly or implicitly holds itself up as the one true approach. The do's of one approach are often the dont's of another. Each has its own jargon.*

*The success of these programs is often based upon observable behavioral changes such as the duration and frequency of response patterns or improvements in attitudes. The assumption of many of these interventions is that parents are desperately reaching out for practical childrearing techniques which will alleviate their pressing and immediate concerns. If parents are taught skills directly, then both their attitudes and behavior toward their children will undergo marked and lasting change.*

*There is some evidence which suggests the contrary that parents are less concerned with solving particular troublesome behaviors and more interested in knowing about the developmental aspect of children (Clark-*

Stewart, 1978). Programs which focus on "correct" methods for dealing with specific child behaviors often have limited transfer value (Tavormina, 1974). Also, the use of attitudes as criteria for success in parent intervention programs has been questioned (Chilman, 1970, Newberger, 1977). The reason for this is that attitudinal changes may be transient in duration and not really reflect internal structural changes indicative of increased conceptual development. Thus, intervention aimed at cognitive restructuring may lead to problem-solving of a general nature while that geared to the development of specific skills may result in the ability of parents to solve only those problems identified during the training program.

Grimes (1974) conducted a study in which she presented Kohlbergian moral dilemmas to parents and children together. Varying levels of moral reasoning among group members served as a basis for diverse conflict solutions. Significant gains in cognitive-moral development were made by both parents and their participating children. In 1981 Savage replicated Grimes study and achieved similar results.

The study reported here was undertaken in order to enhance the conceptual awareness of parents across several dimensions by providing them with detailed information about various aspects of child development and by exposing them to parent-child conflict dilemmas designed to create cognitive conflict with the ultimate goal of achieving cognitive-developmental growth. The construct used to express a given level of such growth was parental awareness and is defined as

> an organized knowledge system with which the parent makes sense out of the child's responses and behavior and formulates policies to guide parental action. At successive stages of Parental Awareness, parents

> would theoretically be aware of deeper aspects of the child and of more complex interactions between the child and themselves. With greater awareness, greater flexibility would evolve in sorting through the dimensions and arriving at resolutions of the tasks of parenthood.
>
> (Newberger, 1980)

The four levels of parental awareness are:

1. Egoistic Orientation
2. Conventional Orientation
3. Subjective-individualistic Orientation
4. Analytic Orientation

It was hypothesized that the development of parental awareness would be facilitated through an intervention designed to increase the parents' understanding of the child and of the application of that understanding in the resolution of parent-child conflict dilemmas.

It was further hypothesized that both participating parents and their children would perceive improvements in parental behavior.

## PROCEDURE

### Subjects

Parents and their children between the ages of 8 and 11 served as subjects (N=52) and were randomly placed into a treatment and control group. There were 11 parents and their 16 children in the treatment group and 11 parents and their 14 children in the control group. Only the parents were directly involved in the intervention program. Participants were voluntary and were solicited through local advertizing. All of the parents were white

and between the ages of 20 and 40. They represented a lower-middle to middle class socioeconomic level. Most members completed high school and some had college degrees. The participants were drawn from an industrial city and its bordering suburbs approximately 30 miles north of Boston, Massachusetts.

Treatment

Parents in the treatment group met weekly for two hours for a total of 12 sessions. Each meeting involved a didactic presentation of child development information (the psychosocial theory of Erikson, the cognitive - developmental theory of Piaget, the moral - cognitive developmental theory of Kohlberg, normative age profiles of Gesell, the role of play in child development, and a developmental view of discipline), and group discussion of real and hypothetical parent-child conflict dilemmas. The parents were given handouts representing age levels birth through age 1, ages 2 to 3, ages 4 to 5, ages 6 to 11, and ages 12 to 16. Following discussion of a given age level, a parent-child conflict dilemma was introduced relative to that particular age level. The reason for this was to have parents remain cognizant of what children were like and what could be expected of them at a particular age level. In this way their strategies could be less arbitrary and more developmentally appropriate. A hypothetical dilemma offered by the researcher served as a stimulus for parents to generate their own real ones.

The parents in the control group received no treatment.

Instruments

The Parental Awareness Measure (PAM) designed by Newberger (1977) was

used to assess the level at which parents reasoned about their conceptions of the child as a person, the parent-child relationship, and the parental role. This measure is a semi-structured reflective interview in which parents are questioned on eight issues which represent tasks inherent in the parental role such as understanding the child's subjective experience and needs, communication and trust, discipline, and learning to be a good parent. These eight issues are scored on a 4 point scale with level I representing the lowest level of parental awareness and level 4 the highest.

A modified version of the Children's Report of Parental Behavior Inventory (CRPBI) designed by Schaefer (1965) was used to assess perceptions of parental behavior. The original instrument was modified so that both childrens' and parents' perceptions of parental behavior could be measured. The result was a 40-item 3-point Likert-type scale with language appropriate to the reading levels of children in the study. Each item was equivalent so that a child and his/her parent would be responding to the same specific parental behavior. Like the PAM, the modified CRPBI included content involving typical parent-child interactions.

Both measures were administered to the parents and children of both treatment and control groups before and directly after the intervention. Four months following the intervention, parents in the treatment group and their children were re-interviewed.

An informal measure was also used which allowed parents to rate the program across several dimensions by responding to a 12-item 5-point Likert-type scale and to questions designed to elicit subjective reactions.

## RESULTS

An analysis of co-variance of the PAM scores (Table 1) indicated that parents participating in the treatment group significantly increased their levels of parental awareness in comparison to parents in the no-treatment control group, $F = 5.54$, $p < .03$. When the parents of the treatment group were retested four months following the intervention, their scores on the PAM (Table 2) showed a significant further increase in comparison to their posttest scores, $t = 2.19$, $p < .05$.

The results of an analysis of co-variance on the scores of the modified CRPBI (Table 3) indicated that in comparison to the no-treatment control group, those parents in the treatment group significantly improved in self-perceptions of parental behavior, $F = 4.13$, $p < .05$. However, when retested four months after the intervention program, parents in the treatment group did not make any further gains in their perceptions of improved parental behavior (Table 4), even though their parental awareness scores continued to increase.

Children did not report changes in their perceptions of their parents' behavior either following or four months subsequent to the intervention (Tables 5 & 6).

Table 1. Analysis of Covariance and Descriptive Statistics of Parental Awareness Measure for Post Tests

| Source of Variation | Sum of Squares | DF | Mean Square | F | Significance of F |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Covariates (Pre) | 2.649 | 1 | 2.649 | 57.890 | .001 |
| Main Effects (Group) | 0.254 | 1 | 0.254 | 5.542 | .03 |
| Explained | 2.903 | 2 | 1.451 | 31.716 | .001 |
| Residual | 0.869 | 19 | 0.046 | na | na |
| Total | 3.772 | 21 | 0.180 | na | na |

| | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|---|---|---|
| Treatment Group | 2.142 | 0.334 |
| Control Group | 1.727 | 0.414 |

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Table 2. T-Test for Correlated Samples and Descriptive Statistics of Parental Awareness Measure for Treatment Group Follow-up Tests

| (Difference) Mean | Standard Deviation | Standard Error | Corr. | 2-Tail Prob. | T Value | df | Level of Signif. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| -.1818 | .275 | .083 | .802 | .003 | -2.19 | 10 | .05 |

| | Mean | Standard Deviation | Standard Error |
|---|---|---|---|
| Posttest | 2.1418 | .334 | .101 |
| Post-Posttest | 2.3236 | .457 | .138 |

Table 3. Analysis of Covariance and Descriptive Statistics of Perceptions of Parental Behavior Inventory (Parent Form) for Post Tests

| Source of Variation | Sum of Squares | DF | Mean Square | F | Significance of F |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Covariates (Pre) | 0.124 | 1 | 0.124 | 47.573 | .001 |
| Main Effects (Group) | 0.011 | 1 | 0.011 | 4.131 | .05 |
| Explained | 0.134 | 2 | 0.067 | 25.852 | .001 |
| Residual | 0.049 | 19 | 0.003 | na | na |
| Total | 0.184 | 21 | 0.009 | na | na |

| | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|---|---|---|
| Treatment Group | 106.5 | 7.1 |
| Control Group | 96.5 | 8.9 |

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Table 4. T-Test for Correlated Samples and Descriptive Statistics of Perceptions of Parental Behavior Inventory (Parent Form) For Treatment Group Follow-up Tests

| (Difference) Mean | Standard Deviation | Standard Error | Corr. | 2-Tail Prob. | T Value | df | Level of Signif. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| -.0009 | .032 | .010 | .922 | .000 | -0.09 | 10 | ns |

| | Mean | Standard Deviation | Standard Error |
|---|---|---|---|
| Posttest | 106.45 | 7.1 | 2.1 |
| Post-Posttest | 106.55 | 8.2 | 2.5 |

Table 5. Analysis of Covariance and Descriptive Statistics of Perceptions of Parental Behavior Inventory (Child Form) for Post Tests

| Source of Variation | Sum of Squares | DF | Mean Square | F | Significance of F |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Covariates (Pre) | 0.278 | 1 | 0.278 | 53.308 | .001 |
| Main Effects (Group) | 0.011 | 1 | 0.011 | 2.108 | ns |
| Explained | 0.289 | 2 | 0.144 | 27.708 | .001 |
| Residual | 0.151 | 29 | 0.005 | na | na |
| Total | 0.440 | 31 | 0.014 | na | na |

| | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|---|---|---|
| Treatment Group | 101.4 | 7.0 |
| Control Group | 89.9 | 13.5 |

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Table 6. T-Test for Correlated Samples and Descriptive Statistics of Perceptions of Parental Behavior Inventory (Child Form) For Treatment Group Follow-up Tests

| (Difference) Mean | Standard Deviation | Standard Error | Corr. | 2-Tail Prob. | T Value | df | Level of Signif. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| -1.6471 | 5.979 | 1.450 | .679 | .003 | -1.14 | 16 | ns |

| | Mean | Standard Deviation | Standard Error |
|---|---|---|---|
| Posttest | 101.41 | 6.983 | 1.694 |
| Post-Posttest | 103.06 | 7.822 | 1.897 |

Analysis of a program questionnaire indicated that parents tended to perceive the program as helpful, worthwhile, and informative.

## DISCUSSION

These results suggest that parents increased their levels of parental awareness as a result of the intervention. A more important finding is that when the intervention had been terminated for a period of four months, those parents who had been participants continued to make gains in parental awareness. This growth in the absence of further stimulus conditions suggests that the Parental Awareness Measure represents an internal cognitive maturational process and not simply a feeding back of learned material. This is in marked contrast to studies of the effects of other types of intervention which report short-lived effects upon follow-up testing. Although parents in the intervention program significantly improved in their perceptions of their own behavior directly following the program, their lack of further gains upon follow-up testing suggests that there is not a direct or immediate expression in parental behavior of changes in parental awareness, or, if parental awareness matures and behavior continues to change in a positive direction as measured by the Perceptions of Parental Behavior Inventory, those changes are not acknowledged by a parent who has become more self-critical.

There were no significant differences in the children's reports of parental behavior either between the treatment and control group children or before and following intervention. One possible explanation is that behavior of the parents of treatment and control group children did not change, at least in terms of what was listed on the measure. It is also

possible that behavior change on the part of parents with increased parental awareness did occur, but was not directly perceived by their children. Children between the ages of 8 and 11 may be likely to take note of only marked differences in parental behavior. Another possibility is that parental awareness may be a forerunner of changes in behavior that require a longer incubation period to manifest to children than the four month follow-up of this study.

In conclusion, these findings lend support to the hypothesis of social cognitive development in parenthood and suggest in a preliminary way that development can be facilitated through intervention. It is less clear whether changes in parental awareness are directly or immediately reflected in parental behavior as perceived by the parents and their children. It also remains unclear whether this particular intervention uniquely facilitates the development of parental awareness, or whether such development would be fostered by other interventions as well. More intervention studies are clearly needed in order to better understand how the development of parental understanding can best be enhanced.

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